

Benefits of a Quality Parks, Sports, and Recreation System

(Adapted from the “Benefits of Parks and Recreation” NRPA, 1996)

Introduction

Within the public parks, sports, and recreation industry there is a well-known, well-researched, philosophy that conveys the impact of parks, sports, and recreation on quality of life. For decades, parks and recreation jurisdictions have strived to quantify and qualify the positive impact that a quality parks, sports, and recreation system has on all facets of the human existence. Although parks, sports, and recreation consistently top public opinion polls pertaining to government priorities, the Commission wants decision makers to fully understand the real world impact that a quality parks, sports, and recreation system has on people’s everyday lives. Besides meeting the crystal clear priorities of the voters, a significant investment in a quality system can ultimately reduce the investment needed in many other aspects of jurisdictional responsibilities including human services, criminal justice, and public health.

The benefits of parks, sports, and recreation can essentially be separated into four interconnected categories: individual, community, environmental, and economic. There are thousands of studies that support these relationships and examples of some of the findings are included.

Individual Benefits

*“I would go to more dances.
I would ride more merry-go-rounds.
I would pick more daisies.”*

-from “If I had to Live my Life Over”
by Nadine Star, age 85

As the title entails, individual benefits essentially are personal and apply to the self. They are opportunities for living, learning, and leading full and productive lives, as well as, avenues for people to experience purpose, pleasure, health, and well being. With over 1.7

million “selves” in King County the collective impact of these individual benefits is astounding. At this scale, these individual benefits of a parks, sports, and recreation system begin to play a substantial and positive role in most social issue challenges and matters of public health.

Specific individual benefits of parks, sports, and recreation include but are not limited to:

- Full and meaningful life
- Balance between work and play
- Life satisfaction
- Quality of life
- Personal development and growth
- Self esteem and self reliance
- Sense of accomplishment
- Creativity and adaptability
- Problem solving and decision making
- Physical health and maintenance
- Psychological well being
- Personal appreciation and satisfaction
- Sense of adventure
- Outlets for stimulation

Individual Benefits: The Research

As mentioned before, there are many reports and studies supporting these individual benefits and anyone who participates in our parks, sports, or recreation system already appreciates them, consciously or otherwise.

- Starting an activity program reduced the risk of dying by 51% in men who became physically active when compared to those who remained sedentary. (Blair, 1993)
- Estimated 66,000 (U.S.) deaths from coronary heart disease, colon cancer, and diabetes could be prevented annually if one-half of the sedentary people became active on a regular basis. (Powell and Blair [In Press]).
- In a study of 492 workers in two pharmaceutical firms, Rosenfeld and Tenenbaum (1992) found that perceived well

being was higher for individuals involved in regular physical activity than for those who were not involved in regular physical activity.

- Each additional mile walked or run by a sedentary person would give him/her an extra 21 minutes of life. (RAND Corporation, 1993)
- A recent meta-analysis (big review of all findings on the topic) found that a bout of acute exercise leads to a reduction in tension and anxiety for up to 30 minutes following the activity-irrespective of the intensity or the duration of the exercise. (Cited in Rejeski, J., Thompson, A., Brubaker, P., & Miller, H., 1992)
- Brown (1991) attempted to determine if physical fitness buffers the negative effects of life stress. He found that people who are physically fit are less vulnerable to the adverse effects of life stress than those who are less fit.
- Psychologists found that pleasant events such as a walk in the woods or dinner with friends gave a boost to the immune system that lasted two or three days. (Sachs and Segal, 1995)
- When examining a sample of active middle-aged and older adults, one's sense of physical competence was the best predictor of life satisfaction. Those people who participated in an exercise program had higher levels of perceived physical ability and perceived their lives to be more satisfying, (Tappe, M., & Duda, J" 1989)
- Physically active older adults have lower blood pressure than do their less active counterparts. (Pescatello et al., 1990)
- Active middle-aged and older populations have lower total cholesterol levels than do their less active counterparts. (Reaven et al" 1990)
- For each additional mile walked or run by a sedentary person, that individual would add an extra 21 minutes to his/her life. (RAND Corporation, 1993)

- A study by psychologists found that pleasant events such as dinner with friends or a weekend hike in the woods gave a boost to the immune system that lasted two to three days. (Sachs and Segal. "Mind & Body," New Woman, December 1994, p. 50.)
- Older people often experience a loss in aerobic power that can be debilitating, but the results of a longitudinal study concluded that habitual exercise could be effective in preventing or slowing this decline. (Kasch et al. "The Effect of Physical Activity and Inactivity on Aerobic Power in Older Men," Physician and Sports Medicine, 1990)

Community Benefits

We have an obligation to try to do something to counter this social and spiritual plague. Too many people have simply given up.

-Arthur Ashe in "Days of Grace"

Community benefits are those that maintain our connection with our fellow citizens. No man is an island. We live and interact within families, work groups, neighborhoods, communities, and ultimately the world. Our world is the most connected it has ever been through technology, yet we have never been more disconnected in these interactions than we are today. Parks, sports, and recreation is one of the last universal platforms for us as a society to recapture the human spirit in these interactions and ultimately reconnect with our fellow citizens on the most basic of levels.

Specific community benefits of parks, sports, and recreation include but are not limited to:

- Strong, vital, involved communities
- Connected families
- Ethnic and cultural understanding and harmony
- Community pride
- Support for youth .lifelines for the elderly
- Reduced alienation
- Reduced delinquency
- Outlets for conflict resolution
- Social bonding
- Understanding and tolerance

Community Benefits: The Research

There are also countless studies that document the community benefits of a quality parks, sports, and recreation system. Anecdotally, it is also often used by many families as one of the most important factors in determining the livability and overall value of any given community or neighborhood.

- People who are socially involved are two to five times less likely to suffer from heart disease (Club Industry, October 1995)
- Regular volunteer work more than any other activity increases life expectancy (Rockefeller, Growalk, and Loks, 1988 cited by Godbey in Justifying Recreation and Parks to Decision Makers" in Trends, volume 3D, 11/4/93)
- Csikszentmihalyi and Kleiber found that that fondest memories people have of their past tend to involve family outings and vacations (Csikszentmihalyi and Kleiber, "Leisure and Self-Actualization," In Driver, et al. Benefits of Leisure, 1991)

Environmental Benefits

"Perhaps nature is our best assurance at immortality"
-Eleanor Roosevelt

A quality parks, sports, and recreation system is often the last protection in the battle over industrialization, commercialization, and the pressures of urban sprawl. In an increasingly claustrophobic and synthetic world of cubicles, fluorescent lights, skyrise buildings, and traffic jams, the parks, sports, and recreation system represents our last opportunity to get outside to run, skip, jump, dance, twirl, ride, fly, swim, paddle, sail, or otherwise enjoy the simple pleasures of earth, water, and sky.

Specific environmental benefits of a quality parks, sports, and recreation system include but are not limited to:

- Environmental health and protection
- Catalyst for relocation
- Physical health and wellbeing
- Stress reduction
- Source of community pride

- Enhanced property values
- Clean air and clean water
- Preservation of open space
- Protection of the ecosystem

Environmental Benefits: The Research

One does not have to be an environmentalist to understand or appreciate the benefits of having open spaces and places to enjoy the outdoors. The research supporting the value of types of open spaces is endless; here are some interesting facts.

- In Philadelphia, after police helped neighbors clean up vacant lots and plant gardens, burglary and theft in that neighborhood dropped by 90%. (Healing America's Cities, 1994)
- The Joint Economic Development Committee of Congress reported that cities' quality of life is more important than purely business factors when it comes to attracting new business. (Benefits of Recreation Research Update. Parks p. 3. 1994)
- It's been determined that in a city environment every tree is worth \$275 in benefits each year due to reductions in air-conditioning costs, erosion control, wildlife protection, and air pollution control. (Florida Department of Natural Resources)
- When Money magazine was conducting its 1995 poll for Best Places to Live, it commissioned Roper/Starch Worldwide, a New York City polling firm, to ask a statistically representative sample of Money subscribers (median age: 49; median household income: \$62,500) what they valued in a place to live by rating 41 factors from low-crime rate to future job growth. Clean water rated as the number one priority for the fourth time in five years followed by clean air in the number two slot. (Smith and Nance-Nash, "The Best Place to Live Today," Money, September 1995, p. 131)
- The availability of such things as drinking water is related to open space preservation. The city of New York facing problems with safe drinking water had the choice of either spending \$5 billion on a water filtration plant or spending \$250 million creating a watershed protection area. (Healing America's Cities, 1994)

Economic Benefits

"It is the influence of leisure on consumption which makes the short day and the short week so necessary."

-Henry Ford

The economic benefits of a quality parks, sports, and recreation system has two flavors; first, community sports and recreation is and always will be "big business"; second, parks, sports, and recreation investments create direct and indirect savings in two very expensive areas of jurisdictional responsibility: public health and criminal justice

Specific economic benefits of a quality parks, sports, and recreation system include but are not limited to:

- Economic stimulant
- Reduced health care costs
- Reduced vandalism and crime
- Revenue generator
- Enhanced land values
- Catalyst for tourism
- Productive workforce

The Economic Benefits: The Research

Besides plenty of research the traditional direct economic development potential, there is also extensive evidence that per dollar investments in parks, sports, and recreation yield incredible indirect public savings in criminal justice, especially, juvenile, public health and workforce productivity.

- The nation could save \$20 billion per year in the United States if every sedentary American walked an hour a day according to a study conducted by Brown University. (As reported in "One Small Step for Mankind" in The Hartford Advocate, 10/12/95)
- Americans spend approximately \$634 million per year on golf balls. (USA Today, 12/8/95)
- Reno, NV opened a \$47.5 million National Bowling Stadium early in 1995 and in the first six months generated \$238 million.

- A study conducted by the University of Illinois and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago found that visitors to the 1995 Monet exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago generated a \$389 million economic benefit to the city with visitors spending \$31 million on hotels; \$31 million on shopping; \$22 million in restaurants, and \$18 million for transportation. (Howlett, Debbie, "Money is Chicago's Stroke of Fortune" USA Today, 12/7/95, p. 3A.)
- Each additional mile walked or run by a sedentary person would save U.S. society an average of 34 cents in medical and other costs. (RAND Corporation, 1993)
- The Phoenix (Ariz.) Parks, Recreation and Library Department, when expanding its late night/weekend activities over the summer months, found that such programs result in a 52% reduction in juvenile crime. Such programs were provided at a cost of 74 cents per person whereas the cost to incarcerate one teen for a year is \$38,000. (Phoenix Parks, Recreation, and Library Department, 1994)
- Each additional mile walked or run by a sedentary person would save U.S. society an average of 34 cents in medical and other costs. (RAND Corporation. 1993)
- A Brown University study found that if each American walked one hour a day we could reduce healthcare costs annually by \$20 billion. (1995)
- In Vail, CO, the assessed value of the property in this vacation resort is \$6.5 billion, an amount equal to the gross national products of Bolivia and Nicaragua. (Flotsam and Jetsom, Pelican Press, September 1995) In Lowell, MA, at the Lowell National Historic Site, for every public dollar invested in its economic renewal, an additional \$7 of private investment was generated. (Phoenix Project Handbook, Section II, page 28, 1995)
- A study of tourism in Galveston, Texas, in 1991 found that the 180,000 people visiting the Strand Historic District and the 100,000 attendees at the Dickens festival resulted in people spending \$18 million in Galveston, creating \$2.7 million in salaries. (Phoenix Project Handbook, Section II, page 28, 1995)